

Gossip Chains: A New Twist on an Old Activity

By John Wheeler

I have had a lot of fun in my EFL teaching career with the well-known language practice activity called either "Telephone," "Chinese Whispers," or "Gossip." But I have never been happy that the majority of the class can not participate during most of the activity. They often can neither speak nor hear what is going on around them. This could present a problem in classroom management if you have 20 or more students in your class.

In its favor, the activity usually makes a point and provides laughter. This is especially true when students are passing around an imperative sentence with a tricky minimal pair phoneme (such as "Draw a ship on the board" or "Stand up and touch your *bag* ") and the last person receiving the message has to perform the action. In these cases, even if the sentence makes it around the class intact, the short vowel in "ship" is often lengthened to "sheep," and the final voiced consonant in "bag" devoices to "back." Nevertheless "Gossip" is an effective icebreaker activity which can also serve as a springboard for a pronunciation exercise or a lesson on minimal pairs.

Somehow, though, I have always felt that somewhere deep in this activity there is the potential for real conversation whereby students could all benefit simultaneously from the listening and speaking practice. After a considerable amount of thought and calculation, I came up with a procedure which I feel achieves this goal. I dubbed my new activity "Gossip Chains" (see Footnote 1 below) (in the plural) because, unlike in the traditional version of this activity, all students are "gossiping" simultaneously, resulting in many "chains" of conversations.

1. Choose an appropriate probing question for everybody in the class to answer, such as one from the list of "Icebreaker" questions in the Appendix 1. All students will answer the same question.
2. Ask the students to think of their personal answer to the question with three reasons why they feel this way. Students can make notes if it helps them think, but they must have their answer with the three reasons prepared mentally.
3. Divide students into groups of four, and each student in each group takes a letter: A, B, C, or D. If there are one, two, or three students left over from the grouping, have them be "Siamese twins" with a friend for this activity (there must be groups of four for this to work). Here from a bird's-eye view, is how the grouping would look with a class of sixteen students:

A -- B
| |
C -- D

A -- B
| |
C -- D

A -- B
| |
C -- D

A -- B
| |
C -- D

4. Within each group, pair up the A's with the B's and the C's with the D's. Tell them to share their answer to the question *along with the three reasons* with their partner. They can repeat their answer with the three reasons as often as necessary for their partner to remember what they have heard. It is very important that the partner also remember the name of the person whose answer and three reasons they have just heard. Make sure both members of the pair take turns talking and listening, but do not allow students to write anything; they must only talk and listen. You may want to circulate among the pairs to help with any language problems.

A ↔ B
| |
C ↔ D

A ↔ B
| |
C ↔ D

A ↔ B
| |
C ↔ D

A ↔ B
| |
C ↔ D

5. Now re-pair students in the same groups with the A's now talking to the C's and the B's talking to the D's. Tell them to tell their new partner the answer and the three reasons *they have just heard from their previous partner* (not their own answer and reasons) along with the name of their previous partner. Again, do not allow any writing, and let the new pairs repeat as often as necessary for them to remember this new information.

A -- B
[^] [^]
 | |
 v v
 C -- D

A -- B
[^] [^]
 | |
 v v
 C -- D

A -- B
[^] [^]
 | |
 v v
 C -- D

A -- B
[^] [^]
 | |
 v v
 C -- D

6. Finally, have students re-pair once again with a student from another group with the same letter as theirs. As before, they must tell their partner the answer and three reasons *they have just now heard from their most recent partner* along with his/her name (not the answer and reasons their first partner told them). If the total number of students (including "Siamese twins") in your class is not a multiple of eight (8, 16, 24, 32, etc.), there will probably be some confusion at this stage. If this happens, just tell students to find someone whose story they have not heard so far.

A ↔ A B ↔ B C ↔ C D ↔ D
 A ↔ A B ↔ B C ↔ C D ↔ D

7. Bring the class together, and ask any student to tell the whole class what s/he has just heard from the latest partner. The student must identify this partner. (If the pairing has been done correctly, what the student is now reporting to the class will have passed through the ears and mouths of three different students!) When the student has finished reporting, call on the student whose answer it originally was, and ask him/her if anything had changed in the process of triple pairing. It is amazing how little the passed- down answers and reasons evolve, but sometimes there are some surprises with subsequent laughs. Keep going around the class choosing students at random to report and compare with the original.

Conclusion

This may sound like a complicated activity to organize, but if you follow the above directions carefully and form "Siamese twins" with any odd numbers, it will go surprisingly smoothly. Even if there is a little chaos during the third and final pairing off, this should not detract from

the main point at this stage of the activity, which is for each student to find a new partner from a different group.

You can play "Gossip Chains" again and again with the same class simply by choosing a different question each time. And you can stretch out the activity as long as there are students willing to report. If you like, you can take notes on errors and mistakes you hear while circulating during the pair work and discuss these with the class afterwards.

This activity requires absolutely no preparation time or materials of any kind, it keeps every student either speaking or listening the whole time, and it can serve as the springboard for class discussion on whatever topics may arise. By mixing students up, it also allows them to get to know each other better-a great help in a class that has not yet quite developed a sense of group cohesion-a very important element in a communicative classroom.

John Wheeler is Coordinator of the USIA EFL Fellow Program in Slovakia.

Footnote 1

I apologize if I have claimed credit for a similar activity that may have been previously devised.

Appendix 1

Icebreaker

1. If you went to a deserted island, which one person would you take with you?
2. If you could improve one thing about your personality what would it be?
3. Where in the world would you most like to visit and why?
4. As you grow older, what is your most serious concern?
5. As a small child, who was your best friend?
6. What would you do if you suddenly became a millionaire?
7. What is something you are particularly proud of?
8. What is the most beautiful sight you have ever seen?
9. Think of your best friend. What is his/her worst characteristic?
10. Name your worst habit.
11. Name a skill that you would like to learn before you die and tell why.
12. Who has helped you most in your life? Describe this person and what s/he did.
13. What is your most prized possession?
14. What is the funniest experience you have had in your life?
15. What would you do if you had only 24 hours to live?
16. After you die, what would you like people to say about you?
17. When was the last time you cried? What were the circumstances?

18. Name something you do regularly that you really dislike?
19. Name something you do regularly that you really like?
20. What are some things that you do/don't do well?